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Testimony before the Committee on Education
H.B. 6432: An Act Concerning Closing the Achievement Gap
Submitted by Maggie Adair, Deputy Director
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The Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS) would like to thank Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Committee on Education for the opportunity to offer comment on **HB 6432: An Act Concerning Closing the Achievement Gap**. As an organization committed to advancing steps to end poverty in Connecticut, we support the intent of this bill to improve the quality of education for all children in Connecticut.

CAHS is pleased that Section 3 of the bill, “develop model curricula in reading and mathematics for use by local and regional boards of education for grades prekindergarten to grade four,” addresses early literacy and grade-level reading. The bill could be strengthened by placing even greater focus on early reading, enhanced reading assessment tools, and teacher training.

Research has confirmed that the opportunity to maximize on children’s capacity for learning is best seized as early as possible in their development. Research shows that a child’s reading skills set is often linked to his/her longer-term success. Therefore, it is imperative that research-based strategies with robust reaching assessments are implemented in schools, as early as prekindergarten.

For years, CAHS has been involved early care and education policy and advocacy efforts. In the past year, CAHS has expanded its work to examine the importance of grade-level reading. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, CAHS released a report in December 2010, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Early Reading Success and Connecticut’s Economic Future*.

CT’s Blueprint for Reading Achievement

In our research and interviews with early reading experts, we found that Connecticut has done a significant amount of research to support the overall planning and implementation of reading success strategies. *CT’s Blueprint for Reading Achievement*, published in 2000 by the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) and the Connecticut Early Reading Success Panel, is one of the state’s best kept-secrets for eliminating reading difficulties for the majority of

Connecticut children in kindergarten through grade three. It is based on the findings of national reading research and the experiences of expert teachers.

CT's Blueprint cites national reading research and articulates the competencies teachers and children must develop. *CT's Blueprint* recommendations include the following:

- Primary teachers must know how to adapt reading instruction to meet individual differences.
- Primary-level language instruction must involve explicit, systematic teaching in five skill areas: (a) word-identification, including phonics and phonemic awareness; (b) fluent and accurate word identification in context; (c) comprehension; (d) spelling; and (e) writing.
- Primary reading instruction must include opportunities for children to read widely in a variety of interesting texts appropriate to their grade and to individual children's reading levels.
- In order to teach a wide range of children effectively, primary-level teachers must have adequate resources, both human and material.
- Schools of education must provide prospective teachers with adequate preparation to teach reading well to children with diverse needs.
- Effective teacher education requires ongoing professional development as well as rigorous pre-service preparation.

Examine Reading Assessment Tools

To ensure the efficacy of those recommendations there is room for some improvement in the instruments and strategies currently employed for reading assessment. Connecticut teachers currently use the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), a nationally standardized instrument to assess children's reading progress. The test is given independently to each child. The DRA is paper-driven, time consuming, and has limited ability to assess the entire scope of a children's reading ability.

DRA gets a mixed review among teachers. Some say it provides good information about reading progress but takes much more time than teachers have for individual assessment. Others say DRA is too subjective a test and doesn't really help teachers understand why a child is having a particular problem. Because it is not comprehensive, teachers now are using additional reading test tools, which they then try to cobble together to come up with an assessment.

Connecticut's education policy makers should consider more robust reading software tools that allow teachers to conduct read-time assessments, drill down deeper into a children's reading ability and barriers, provide more detailed direction about what the child needs, saves time, and gives the teacher more instructional time in the classroom.

Invest in Teacher Training

Success in implementing effective reading strategies is heavily dependent on the ability of teachers to deliver the curriculum. Reading instruction is certainly an art and a science. Attention needs to be given to continued teacher training and evaluation. As outlined in our CAHS report:

- Teachers must master a thorough knowledge of the science of reading that includes language structure and the ability to translate those concepts to young children. The science of reading includes aspects of phonetics, phonology, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax, and text structure.
- One of the most recent efforts to reduce the academic achievement gap is the state administrative requirement that prospective teachers applying for an Integrated Early Childhood, PK-3 Endorsement, or Elementary Education Grades K-6 Endorsement must pass the Foundations of Reading test.
- First-round test results showed uneven pass rates for teacher candidates from Connecticut teaching institutions. Overall, 35 percent of teaching candidates failed the exam.
- The Foundation test only addresses the reading pedagogy skills of emerging teachers. But teachers who have been in the class room for some time also needs to learn new skills. Many long-time reading teachers do not have the latest information on reading pedagogy and do not know that they do not have the best skills to teach reading. Education leaders should require all teachers pre-kindergarten through grade 4 to take the test.

While teaching reading may be rocket science, if Connecticut is to make a dramatic shift from the position of having the worst achievement gap in the country it is imperative that necessary steps are taken to implement research-based strategies for reading instruction and assessment, coupled with ongoing teacher training and evaluation.



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Closing the Achievement Gap: Early Reading Success and Connecticut's Economic Future

Recommendations

Closing the academic achievement gap should be among Connecticut policymakers' highest priorities. Building on *Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement* and national reading research findings, the following steps can improve the likelihood of fourth grade reading success for all children and narrow the gap. These recommendations are especially important for the populations of children with the lowest test scores, including children in low-income families and communities and students of color.

1. Commit fully to the elimination of the academic achievement gap by passing legislation and funding for a new Grade Level Reading Initiative. Legislation must be targeted specifically to reading improvement and include a strong evaluation component.
2. Establish the Early Reading Success Institute proposed under Public Act 99-227. Charge the Institute with developing a plan, cost estimates, and time line for the implementation of the *Connecticut Blueprint* at the district level.
3. Establish literacy coaches for teachers to support pre-literacy, reading classes, and developmentally appropriate practices in all schools that serve preschool through grade four children. Literacy coaches should have a master's degree in reading instruction and extensive knowledge in the science of teaching reading.
4. Review reading curricula at Connecticut public universities and colleges with the goal of revamping and improving the knowledge and ability of prospective teachers so that they are able to pass Connecticut Foundations of Reading test with honors.
5. Fully fund school readiness programs for all three- and four-year-olds in families with income less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, beginning with Priority and Competitive School Districts.
6. Support the pre-literacy of Connecticut children under the age of three by providing parents with information on what they can do to begin the language learning of their youngest children.
7. Provide free materials, DVDs, and classes about pre-literacy and the role of infant-toddler teachers to all caregivers caring for and teaching infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Connecticut leaders, in the public policy and education arenas and in the private sector, have started the process to improve reading success for children across the state. To compete successfully in the global economy for decades to come, we must act with urgency and fully utilize our relatively abundant resources. Connecticut needs a plan of action that will capitalize on successful programs and initiate creative solutions where none currently exist. Connecticut is doing a number of things well. It's imperative that we ramp up our reform efforts to eliminate the achievement gap and ensure that all of the state's children are competent readers for their well-being and that of our economy.